

3-2012

## Editorial

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

(2012) "Editorial," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 50: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol50/iss1/6>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## *The Practice of Public History: A Special Issue*

Like far too many in my profession, for years I really had no precise idea what “public history” entailed. Students asked me what the term public history meant from time-to-time, and I rambled on with some kind of vague answer about museums, archives, park rangers, and whatever else came to my mind at the time. The honest truth was that I not only had no clue about public history, I was not interested. Such a reaction, sadly, is too frequently typical among professional historians, a consequence borne of arrogance, ignorance, and apathy—three qualities also found far too often among historians.

A sequence of events began to change my perception and understanding of public history and the significant work of public historians. When I came to Stephen F. Austin State University as an Assistant Professor, I discovered that the History Department had a viable and vibrant public history program directed by Dr. Perky Beisel. I also began to notice how excited students were about learning the mechanics of becoming a practicing public historian. After speaking with Beisel, I also started to see how valuable such a program could be to a history department, particularly at the graduate level. My next education in public history began when I became associated with the East Texas Historical Association. It did not take long to realize that the Association’s mission, our focus, and much of our efforts were in fact “public history.” I learned a new appreciation for the sub-field and became dedicated to learning all I could about the practice of history within the public realm.

What I began to learn I found not only intriguing but instructive. Because public historians wear so many hats, work in such diverse venues, and by nature must learn to interact with people outside the academy, public history is not only one of the most malleable areas of the profession, it is probably the most dynamic. The public historian must be able to reduce, compact, and condense often complex historical theories, themes, and paradigms into a format that is accessible and comprehensible to a very broad and wide-ranging audience.

The National Council on Public History describes such a practice thusly:

[P]ublic history is the conceptualization and practice of historical activities with one's public audience foremost in mind. It generally takes place in settings beyond the traditional classroom. Its practitioners often see themselves as mediators on the one hand between the academic practice of history and non-academics and on the other between the various interests in society that seek to create historical understanding. Public history practitioners include museum professionals, government and business historians, historical consultants, archivists, teachers, cultural resource managers, curators, film and media producers, policy advisors, oral historians, professors and students with public history interests, and many others.<sup>1</sup>

Such a statement suggests not only quite a responsibility, but also a certain practice of the profession that demands the public historian be the "face" of the discipline. The public historian is the front line, the historian most visible to those the profession needs to reach. The trained professional public historian must learn a skill that other professional historians often lack—the ability to relate to and communicate with a lay public audience. It is truly an alternate way to practice the craft of history, one that involves active research, cutting-edge interpretation, and effective communication, but it must be done in a way that does not alienate its audience—the public—while still maintaining the professional standards of the discipline. Such demands may make the practice of public history one of the most challenging, but also rewarding, facets of the profession.

The East Texas Historical Association is a public history outlet. Our organization is dedicated to illuminating the unique heritage of our region and sharing that information and scholarship with our members, colleagues, and all the residents of East Texas. Our meetings, in a pure sense, are "public history." Like Dan Utley explains in his essay, I have come to realize that, yes, "I are one," a public historian, just as my colleague Dr. Paul J. P. Sandul has tried to convince me for at least the last couple of years. Thus, it is about time that the *East Texas Historical Journal* produced a public history issue, a full edition dedicated to the

practice of public history, written by public historians passionate about conveying their vision of the discipline to you.

Paul J. P. Sandul and Perky Beisel graciously agreed to serve as the special editors of the project. They commissioned, gathered, and persevered to bring this issue to fruition, and it is, I think, a fantastic accomplishment. In this edition you will find Dan Utley's personal journey to becoming a public historian, and Sandul's direction of some of his public history students to find true enlightenment on race relations through oral history. Linda Reynolds, Jennifer Brancato, Kyle Ainsworth, and Rick Bray give a glimpse "behind the curtain" of practicing public historians and the vital role they serve. Perky Beisel shares the experiences of building a public history program in a university setting, a task in which she has proven to be most proficient.

I hope that you find this special issue informative and enjoyable.

M. SCOTT SOSEBEE  
EDITOR

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> <http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history/>, accessed August 20, 2011.